

## Planning a New or Expanded National Wildlife Refuge: Frequently Asked Questions

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the primary federal agency responsible for conserving the nation's migratory bird and fish species; protecting endangered plants and animals; and providing critical habitat for the diverse living resources that exist in the United



States. The National Wildlife Refuge System was established in 1903 and is a key part of achieving that mission as well as providing people with opportunities to enjoy natural environments that range from arctic tundra to coastal salt marshes, deserts and bottomland hardwood forests.

Public participation is a vital part of the Service's refuge planning process. Environmental documents such as Environmental Assessments are prepared when a new refuge is proposed or an expansion to an existing refuge is considered, and many opportunities for involvement by residents, elected officials, business representatives and local, regional and state agencies are built into the environmental documentation process.

The purpose of creating new refuges and expanding existing refuges is to preserve wildlife, plants and their habitat for the benefit of everyone. At the same time, we appreciate the concerns voiced by many communities about refuge planning and what it means to land owners, rural communities, agriculture, hunting and fishing, and local government. This list of

frequently asked questions is based on questions asked during refuge planning projects throughout Region 3 (which includes Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana and Missouri). These questions and answers are general in scope; you will have many opportunities to ask questions about specific refuge projects throughout the planning process.

**Why locate a national wildlife refuge here?:** A number of factors go into determining locations for new wildlife refuges. Generally, the Service looks at areas with significant wildlife values or the potential for restoration of wildlife values to an area. In many cases a proposal is seeking to fill a void in habitat availability for a group of species of federal interest or for a significant single species, such as an endangered species. For example, an area may provide outstanding habitat for grassland-dependant birds, which is a group of migratory birds that has seen consistently declining populations over the past several years. The Service may be considering a particular location because it has great potential for meeting other established objectives, such as providing environmental education opportunities.



**Will my property be condemned?:** Service policy is to acquire land only from willing sellers.

**If I do not chose to sell my land, will my rights as a property owner be infringed as a result of the refuge designation?:** No. If a refuge is established, the Service will have no more authority over private land within or adjacent to the boundaries of the refuge than any other landowner.

**Is buying land the only option?:** There are a



number of alternatives for achieving the natural resource goals of a proposed refuge.

Resource preservation and restoration options include cooperative agreements,

easements and landowner technical assistance. The Service is eager to work with landowners to find an alternative that is acceptable to them and that contributes to refuge objectives.

**How will the creation of a wildlife refuge affect the area's tax base?:** The Service tries to alleviate the impact of wildlife refuges on state and local taxes by reimbursing local governments for lost tax revenues. The formula that generally yields the highest return for a local unit of government is \$7.50 per \$1,000 of the property's fair market value. Several states have programs that also supplement payments to local school districts if the tax base declines due to the acquisition of public land.

**What is the economic impact of a refuge on a community?:** In many cases, refuges actually draw people into the community, generating income for tourist-oriented businesses and services. *Banking on Nature*, the Service's study of the economic benefits of refuges, found that nationally visitors contribute more than \$400 million every year to local economics. The publication reports that in 1995 non-resident

funds generated at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge in southern Illinois totaled \$3.29 million in the Marion, Ill., region and 76 additional jobs were created. Non-resident refuge visitors spent about \$1.8 million in the Horicon National Wildlife Refuge area in central Wisconsin in 1995, according to *Banking on Nature*, and 41 jobs were added in the area.

**Will drainage be changed in a way that affects my property?:** The Service's intent is to have no impact on drainage from neighboring lands and to follow state laws regarding drainage activities. Service staff work with adjacent landowners and drainage districts to ensure that existing drainage facilities or patterns are not negatively impacted by refuge activity.

**Who is responsible for controlling noxious weeds on refuge property?:** The Service's policy is to control plants listed as noxious weeds by States. This control uses non-chemical methods when possible and chemical treatments when necessary to prevent noxious weeds from spreading to adjacent private farmland.



**When and how can I express my opinions about the proposal?:** You can express an opinion anytime and there are a number of ways to do so. You can talk to Service personnel at one of the several public open house events that will be scheduled throughout the course of this project, or you can schedule a one-on-one meeting with Service staff to discuss the refuge proposal. If you have access to the Internet, you can address e-mail to: [r3planning@fws.gov](mailto:r3planning@fws.gov) at anytime. You can obtain more information and make comments about this project and others that are under way at: <http://midwest.fws.gov/planning>

**A refuge boundary has been established for a wildlife refuge proposal before public participation or final approval; does what I have to say about that boundary matter, or is it a done deal?:**

It is not a done deal, and what you have to say about the proposed boundary will be considered in the proposal evaluation process. The Service's Regional Offices are required to establish a tentative



study area before an evaluation can be initiated. These initial boundaries are flexible and, if the project is approved, the actual area proposed could be smaller or larger than the initial proposal reflects.

**If the refuge is established, is the planning process the only opportunity I will have to provide input into what goes on at the refuge?:**

Community involvement is important to the success of a wildlife refuge. The Service encourages public participation in developing detailed management plans for the refuge. Many refuges have citizen groups that support the refuge through actively participating in refuge activities and operations.

**Some people contend that the Service is destroying farmland when land is taken out of agricultural production and restored as wetlands, grasslands or other habitat; how do you respond?:**

Acquiring land as a national wildlife refuge protects it from development. If the nation's lawmakers someday decide it is needed for agricultural production, it will be there. The soil will actually rebuild itself when indigenous vegetative cover is restored; on the other hand, development can degrade soil and extensive commercial or dense residential development makes it very unlikely that the

land will ever be restored to agricultural purposes in the future.

**Is a federal refuge automatically closed to hunting, fishing and other recreational activities?:**

Not necessarily. The alternatives considered in refuge planning are mandated by Congress (Public Law 105-57, Oct. 9, 1997) to allow compatible wildlife-dependent recreational public uses such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation. Goals and objectives are identified for the refuge (with public input), and the specific public uses are determined based on their consistency with the objectives established for the refuge. A refuge that serves as production areas for a federally endangered species is likely to offer less access for people during periods when the endangered species is present than at other times of the year. In Region 3, 88 percent of the refuges offer public recreational opportunities. Those that are closed include small islands or caves where endangered species or colonial nesting birds are present.



**Where does funding for land acquisition for wildlife refuges come from?:**

Typically, money to acquire land for national refuges comes from the Land and Water Conservation Fund or the Migratory Bird Fund, both of which were established through federal law. The Land and Water Conservation Fund primarily includes the sale of products on federal land, such as offshore oil and gas leases. The Migratory Bird Fund is derived from the sale of federal duck stamps.

**Why is the federal government involved in planning wildlife refuges? Why shouldn't states manage their own refuges?:** Wildlife and habitat simply do not conform to state boundaries, and neither does citizen investment in the nation's natural resources. For example, preserving migratory waterfowl habitat requires a comprehensive approach because flight patterns for particular species can extend across the entire length of the country. Conservation practices in one state would be jeopardized or even nullified by lesser efforts in another state along the flight pattern. Citizenship too extends beyond state lines, and we all have an investment in preserving this country's unique or endangered species and habitats regardless of where we live. While state departments of natural resources are responsible for managing the bulk of wildlife and habitat issues; federal involvement in refuge planning reflects this broader public interest.

**How can you properly manage another refuge if you already have a maintenance backlog on existing refuges?:** National wildlife refuges are not approved overnight, as this brochure suggests. If a wildlife refuge proposal is ultimately approved, the Service's policy of only buying land from willing sellers means that it may be years before there is enough contiguous land for a refuge to be viable. The Service continues to make progress on decreasing its maintenance backlog, but a great deal of habitat could be lost to development or further degradation if we did not get the ball rolling now.

**Who will run the refuge if it is established?:** It might be assigned its own staff and budget, however if there is an existing refuge station nearby, staff from that refuge might be assigned to run it.

**How can I find out more about the National**

**Wildlife Refuge System?:** Region 3 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would be happy to send you additional information on national refuge planning. You can request information by writing to us at: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ascertainment and Planning, 1 Federal Drive, Ft. Snelling, MN 55111; or by calling toll free 1-800-247-1247.

**What happens next if a national refuge is ultimately approved?** Several steps will follow the approval of a new refuge. First, funding must be obtained through congressional action and a national budget ranking process. Second, the refuge is formally established when fee title or an easement interest is acquired in a piece of land within the approved boundary. Finally, detailed management planning in the form of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) will provide future management direction. With public input, the CCP establishes definite goals and objectives for the refuge and identifies specific strategies for achieving those goals. Specific issues, such as cleaning up a contaminated area, the presence of an endangered species or managing an overabundant deer herd, are addressed in separate, step-down plans. The CCP also identifies an implementation and monitoring plan, and progress toward the goals and strategies are reviewed on a regular basis.

